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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000267

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PHUM SCUL KISL SA
SUBJECT: CANCELLATION OF THE JEDDAH FILM FESTIVAL: "TAKE ONE"

REF: JEDDAH 0113

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Classified By: CG Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The fourth annual Jeddah Film Festival, slated to open July 18 was cancelled at 11 pm on July 17. While local media coverage has been limited, what little there is suggests public disappointment at the cancellation. Several theories have been offered by Saudi blogs and post contacts for the festival's cancellation ranging from concerns about nomenclature (the blatant use of the word "film" vs. "visual arts"), controversial film topics, the prospect of "unIslamic" socializing in darkened movie theaters, as well as speculation about a princely attempt to reinforce political leverage by strengthening the religious police. Following represents Post's "first take" on the event. END SUMMARY.

ELEVENTH HOUR CANCELLATION

¶2. (C) In conversation with post, Mamdouh Salem, the annual Jeddah Film Festival organizer since its inception four years ago, stated that an unknown official from the Jeddah Municipality contacted him at 11 pm on July 17 communicating cancellation of the festival. Salem was informed that with apparent guidance from the Grand Mufti, Minister of Interior Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz had issued a declaration preventing film screenings and licensing movie theaters in Saudi Arabia in an effort to "serve the public interest." The cancellation was communicated to all Governorates via a directive from Naif's office by Prince Khaled Al Talal Bin Abdulaziz. Khaled's brother, wealthy investor Prince Waleed Al Talal owns the Rotana Satellite Channel, the primary sponsor of the festival; the channel will likely suffer a one million SAR (USD 260 thousand) loss as a consequence.

¶3. (SBU) The Jeddah Film Festival has been a much anticipated and publicized event in Jeddah for the past four years. Media coverage of the cancellation has appeared in three newspapers; two Arabic and one English language in addition to mention on two liberal Arabic language blogs. Arab News, an English newspaper published in Jeddah, covered the cancellation in a front page article reflecting deep disappointment including interviews with Mamdouh Salem and Saudi film critic Fahd Al Osta, who credited the festivals with improving the Saudi film community.

THEORIES ABOUND

¶4. (C) Several theories are circulating about the

cancellation. The public reason for the cancellation is that the festival venue at the Jeddah Municipality's King Abdul Aziz Cultural Center was not well prepared to receive the audience, perhaps alluding to concerns over capacity or mixed-gender film-goers. The Cultural Center Director, normally forthcoming and candid with Consulate officers, was deliberately vague in relaying the explanation that "site preparations and other elements" caused the cancellation.

NOMENCLATURE: CALL IT "VISUAL ARTS" BUT NOT "FILM"

15. (C) Festival organizers believe that part of the problem lay in the title of the festival itself -- Jeddah Film Festival. Historically films were screened in private clubs in Saudi Arabia until all screenings were banned in the early 1980s on the grounds that the viewing of "movies" contravened Islamic law. Since its inception, the Jeddah Film Festival organizers have consciously referred to the event as the "Visual" Festival, a euphemism which enabled them to screen films while avoiding censure. However, this year organizers chose to emphasize that they were "screening films," playing a role in developing a "film industry" and were planning to launch the &Saudi Film Club8 during the course of the festival. While the selected films were largely conservative, and from the Western perspective neither provocative nor offensive, portraying a positive aspect of Islam, they were nonetheless marketed as "films." The organizers believe that if they had maintained the delicate nomenclature of "visual arts," the festival might not have caught the conservatives' attention and sparked its cancellation.

CONTROVERSIAL CONTENT

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16. (U) A slate of 71 films filled the schedule of this fourth annual Jeddah Film Festival including 50 films from GCC countries and 15 European films. Among them were the first Yemeni entry, portraying the development of terrorism in Yemen, and a European entry portraying parent-child conflict about educational and career decisions. In an attempt to put a positive spin on a bleak situation, Salem opined that the cancellation might be "a positive step" by the Saudi Government to control the export of Yemeni terrorism and potential parent-child friction to susceptible Saudi youth. However, this theory, by Salem's own admission, is unlikely.

SAUDIS DATING IN MOVIE THEATERS

17. (C) In conversation with post, a female IVLP former participant who sits on the Festival's panel of judges relayed the panel's perspective on the cancellation; they believe that the films' content had nothing to do with the cancellation decision, but rather the social implications of creating Saudi audiences for film was a major concern. According to the judges' speculation, influential religious scholars are deeply concerned about unmarried Saudi men and women consorting in darkened cinemas thus contravening Islamic law. Their fear was communicated to the Grand Mufti -- with the resultant cancellation.

PRINCELY STRATEGY

18. (C) COMMENT: The cancellation as well as its last-minute timing were major disappointments for the film lovers of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's most liberal city. The depth of festival preparation(which carefully took into account local customs and laws), the government's permission to stage the festival at a facility under Jeddah Municipality patronage, and a three-year successful track record all seemed to

indicate SAG official support for the developing film industry and Jeddah's trend toward liberalization through the arts. Recent support in the Shura Council for legalizing public cinemas, rumored plans for building movie theaters in city malls, and the Jeddah public's developing thirst for films(reftel) set the stage for a successful fourth festival -- making the abrupt cancellation as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

¶9. (C) Further speculation from post contacts and Saudi blogs suggests that the cancellation may be part of Prince Naif's strengthening of the Committee for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) in order to control Islamic practice and promote conservative behavior. With Naif likely next in line to the Saudi throne behind a progressive King and an absent Crown Prince, some Saudis are arguing -- among themselves and on the blogs -- that the Jeddah Film Festival cancellation and the renewed activity of the Mutawa'een (CPVPV) may be a part of a princely strategy to win support from conservative Islamic quarters to solidify his power base and project energy and authority in the face of doubts about his vitality. END COMMENT.

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